

OAK HILL PARK
411 Howard Street
Petaluma
Sonoma County
California

HALS CA-50
CA-50

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
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HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

OAK HILL PARK

HALS NO. CA-50

Location: 411 Howard Street, Petaluma, Sonoma County, CA
Lat: 38.236987 ° Long: -122.649709 °

Significance: Oak Hill Park was an early Petaluma cemetery was eventually remade into a park through the efforts of a local neighborhood group in the early part of the 20th century. It appears to meet National Register Criteria A. It is significant in the categories of social history, landscape architecture, recreation, and in community planning and development. It is associated with the Women's Improvement Clubs movement and the development of parks locally and nationally.

History: The 4.43 acre site was originally the town cemetery. The site was probably used for burials as early as 1858, and was officially named a town cemetery in 1868. In 1872 a new private cemetery was established and burials were discontinued at Oak Hill in 1878. The town requested that all remains be removed by next of kin. Due to poor record keeping, it is doubtful that all remains were removed.

The city proposed using the site for a school, but realized that the title to the property was impossible to define and a ruling mandated that the site be retained for public use.

In 1903, Miss Rena Shattuck, a local newspaperwoman and a major force behind the Ladies' Improvement Club, suggested that the group convert the site to a park, as they already had done at two other locations in town. In 1908 the Oak Hill Improvement Club was formed; it is not clear how much overlap there was with the Ladies' Improvement Club, or how much was accomplished. A Victorian-era photo shows women picnicking under a large tree; two children sit on a nearby rustic bench. The bench is typical of that in Central Park and Golden Gate Park. The park shows the influence of the states-wide Parks Movement design thinking; unlike prior parks, this park remained naturalistic in character. It appears that the club relied on the naturally occurring oaks and grasses. A newspaper account indicates that gravel paths, a gravel road, benches, picnic tables, and a "small bungalow" for storage were installed.

Following the 1948 Petaluma General Plan, and in response to the current thinking that parks should be heavily programmed, the basketball court and a children's fenced playing area were installed. The lower part of the park was used for Boy Scout jamborees and overnight camping events; a flagpole in this area may be associated with the Scouts use of the park. At some point the road through the park was paved in asphalt and, although of substandard width, it was a busy cut-through route for the neighborhood. Many old oaks began to decline due to the installation of lawn and irrigation. Once again, neighborhood activists raised their voices and gained the removal of the road, the removal of the lawns under the oaks, and the revision of the upper part of the park and the play area.

Description: There are two portions to the park: the upper part is more structured and contains an irrigated lawn area, benches, lighting, a picnic area, petanque court, basketball court,

children's play structure, and restrooms. The lower part of the park is not irrigated and consists of several naturally occurring oaks and grasses. It also contains a bulletin board, flagpole, and picnic tables. An associated area contains a simple stone labyrinth.

Sources: "The Beauties of Oak Park." Petaluma Argus, June 11, 1911

"The City's Play Grounds." Petaluma Daily Courier, June 21, 1911

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Hahn, Campbell and Associates, Planning Consultants. "Master Plan for the City of Petaluma California. 1948

Heig, Adair. "History of Petaluma: A California River Town." San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1987

"Improvements Start at Oak Hill." Petaluma Argus Courier. Nov 15, 1992.

Lippitt, Frank K., "Report of city Attorney on Oak Hill Title." 1900

Mannion, Ed. "Rear View Mirror/" A bound collection of articles written by Ed Mannion for the Petaluma Argus Courier in the 1960s

Petaluma Chamber of Commerce. "The Lowell of the West." Petaluma, no date

Shattuck, Rena. "Petaluma Ladies' Improvement Club." California Ladies' Magazine, Feb 1903.

Historian: Janet Gracyk, Landscape Architect, April 14, 2010
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The upper part of Oak Hill Park as seen in 2008. The picnic area is visible on the right side among some oaks. (Janet Gracyk, August 2, 2008).



Historic image is labeled “Scene in Oak Hill Park” and is undated. Note the rustic-style seating. (Petaluma Historical Library and Museum, used with permission).